

INSIGHTS

In Controversial Company: Conservatives and Far Right United on German Unity Day

SABINE VOLK · OCTOBER 9, 2020 · 4 MINUTE READ



Despite the attempts to draw a clear line between conservatism and the far right, the eastern German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) celebrated the highly symbolic

Introduction

On 3 October 2020, Germany celebrated the 30th anniversary of German Unity. The date bears high symbolic value as it represents the so-called reunification of the former two German states, the Federal Republic or ‘West Germany’ and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or ‘East Germany’. A popular revolution, an economic union, and an international treaty with the victors of World War II had preceded the iconic day of 3 October 1990, when East Germany was incorporated into the Federal Republic and the GDR disappeared from the map.

German Unity Day and the preceding Peaceful Revolution, Germany’s only successful revolution from below ([Rudnick 2011: 17](#)), stand for one of the most positive collective memories in contemporary Germany ([Zwahr 2001](#); [Jessen 2009](#)). Accordingly, the [national government, federal states, and cities](#) planned large-scale public events to celebrate the 30th anniversary. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of these events had to be cancelled or modified. Yet, ceremonial acts with prominent figures from politics and society still took place all over eastern Germany as well as in the capital, Berlin. In these busy days, it got barely noticed that the ceremony in Saxony, the cradle of the Peaceful Revolution, bore a scandal: The governing conservatives celebrated with the AfD – instead of their left-wing coalition partners from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens.

A controversial speaker

The Saxon CDU had invited Arnold Vaatz to give the key note speech at the ceremony in the Saxon state parliament on 3 October 2020. Vaatz was an important [civil rights activist](#) during GDR times and served in several CDU governments after reunification – but had recently polarized the German political debate due to his controversial

measures implemented by the state in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement is associated with far-right and [anti-Semitic](#) ideologies.

As a response to the CDU [insisting](#) on Vaatz giving the most important speech on 3 October despite his recent problematic statements, their left-wing coalition parties in the Saxon state parliament announced to [stay away](#) from the official Unity celebrations in Saxony. Even when it was clear that only the AfD, who is sympathetic to Vaatz' populist positions, would attend the event alongside the CDU parliamentarians, the conservatives did not make a turn. The result: A highly problematic demonstration of unity between the eastern German conservatives and the far right – on German Unity Day of all things.

Not for the first time

It is not the first time that the German Christian Democrats side with the far right rather than the democratic left. In February 2020, CDU and AfD jointly elected a right-wing [regional governor](#) in the eastern German state of Thuringia. The candidate, Thomas Kemmerich from the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), accepted the vote. But he stayed in office for less than [three days](#): a governor by the grace of AfD was too much of a break of taboo. The cooperation between the center right and the far right caused a political earthquake not least due to the cumbersome memories it brought back: In the 1930's, it was the coalition between center-right parties and the far right which brought dictator Adolf Hitler to power.

Even beyond the scandal in Thuringia, CDU and the far right have been closer than the conservatives would like to admit. Whereas the CDU's official party doctrine postulates to [never collaborate](#) with the far right, research by the left-leaning political foundation Heinrich [Böll](#) demonstrates that CDU politicians on the local level frequently join

also with even more [extremist actors](#) associated with the Identitarian Movement, the local initiative Pro Chemnitz, and others.

From a unified to a fractured memory regime

Against the backdrop of the 20th anniversary of Peaceful Revolution and German Unity Day ten years ago, the American political scientist [David Art \(2014\)](#) had categorized Germany as a ‘unified memory regime’. A memory regime, i.e. “a set of cultural and institutional practices that are designed to publicly commemorate and/or remember a single event” ([Kubik & Bernhard 2014: 14](#)), can be classified as unified when all major political and societal actors are in consensus regarding the meaning of a past event. For more than twenty years after East Germany’s transition from state socialism to liberal democracy and market economy, Germany’s consensus was that democracy had finally been reached: “the end of history”.

With the emergence and consolidation of far-right populist actors such as the street movement [PEGIDA](#) and the party AfD, the consensus has been broken. [Comparing](#) the state of democracy and civil rights in the contemporary Federal Republic with the situation in the GDR has become a common rhetorical twist to criticize the Merkel-government. Hence, Germany might be on the way to a ‘fractured memory regime’ characterized by the presence of inappeasable ‘memory warriors’ like in its eastern neighbors Poland ([Bernhard & Kubik 2014](#)) and Hungary ([Seleny 2014](#)). If they want to stay a legitimate political actor, the conservative Christian Democrats will have to carefully choose which side to take: the democratic left or the extremist far right.

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